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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Smirnov, V. A. (2020). The transformation of the Baltic countries' political elites: general and specific features. *Baltic Region*, 12(3), 26-39. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2020-3-2>

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BALTIC COUNTRIES' POLITICAL ELITES: GENERAL AND SPECIFIC FEATURES

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Received 06 June 2020
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-3-2
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This research focuses on the features and transformations of power groups and their role in the political life of the societies of the Baltic countries. This article aims to analyse structural and functional changes in the composition of the Baltic political elites after these countries gained independence in the 1990s. The main objective of this research is to reveal the general and the specific in the transformations of Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian elites. Changes in the structure of power groups are considered on a sub-regional scale in view of the current Russian-Baltic political interaction. The common and distinctive features in the transformations of Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian elites are identified. Quantitative methods of analysis are used to detect trends in the selection of channels and mechanisms of elite recruitment. The study of power groups concentrated on both large-scale socio-political transformations and individual practices. A comprehensive examination of elite transformation in small states such as the Baltics requires the consideration of both domestic and foreign policy aspects. The thesis is put forward that despite some differences between the Baltic States their political elites have undergone very similar transformations since the 1990s. At the time, Baltic elites asserted continuity with pre-war Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia and detachment from the Soviet past. The 1990s elite struggle for power led to sharp ethnic, linguistic and political divides in Baltic societies. These rifts limit competition between power groups and reduce the ability of political systems to renew themselves. Having reached the 'back to the West' goal, Baltic elites replaced it with the idea of 'Russian threat'. Bridging internal divides, which may weaken the power of the elites, was postponed as a result.

Keywords:

elites, power groups, Baltic States, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, transformation, Russia

The relevance of research

With domestic policy depending more and more on the foreign policy, political elites face many challenges: a crisis of their legitimacy, the weakening of vertical power, increasing complexity of control mechanisms and the weakening role of the government institutions [10]. In this sense, the case of the Baltic countries appears particularly interesting.

To cite this article: Smirnov, V.A. 2020, The transformation of the Baltic countries' political elites: general and specific features, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 12, no. 3, p. 26–39. doi: 10.5922/2078-8555-2020-3-2.

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are the only former Soviet republics whose power groups managed to successfully shift (by deep and numerous transformations) from the Eastern to the Western political and economic model and became participants of the main Euro-Atlantic integration processes. Their “return to the West” (the slogan “Back to Europe” was used during the tumultuous 1990s) was accompanied by a rise in nationalist sentiments, the demise of the Soviet power institutions, growing social fragmentation amid difficult reforms, creating a new system of state control, embarking on a policy of neutrality and weakening ties with Russia, etc.

Defining the term Political Elite

When defining the term “political elite”, the author builds on the structural-functional approach developed by Best (Germany) and Higley (USA) [4], and Gaman-Golutvina (Russia) [11].

Higley interprets the term *elites* as individuals and small groups of people, who due to their strategic positions in big organizations, can be regarded leaders in the field they represent; they are capable of constant and significant influence on the achievement of political results. Higley writes that the “elite” includes those who do not have a formal membership in the ruling minority but can nonetheless influence the adopted decisions and are part of the “counter-elite” [7]. This approach excessively broadens the scope of the term *elite*, making it vague and hard to define. I agree with Higley’s idea that the term “elite” refers to those who hold strategically key commanding positions. However, adding the “counter-elite” (public activists, dissidents, etc.) seems to be unproductive. In this regard, I find Best and Higley’s idea of a “small inner circle” of the elite more useful. By a small inner circle, they meant members of groups that control various government functions and other power segments [5, p.7]. Yet, this idea leads to another extreme: excessive narrowing of the elite group down to a few dozen individuals or even single individuals.

Gaman-Golutvina points out that the political elite can be defined as the internally consolidated social group that comprises the minority of society; it is the group that prepares and makes the most important strategic decisions and holds the necessary resource potential for this. The researcher notes that the multitude of power groups and their fractions, in reality, does not contradict the idea of the internal integration of the elite [19].

This definition of political elites needs revision; it should take into account the criterion of direct access of the elite to state authorities and its ability to influence decision-making. Small groups of people who occupy important positions should be attributed to the political elite insofar as the possession of these positions provides them with not only the necessary resources, but also an opportunity to systematically and significantly exert influence on state authorities and,

in general, on the state. This approach to defining the political elite can be called the state-centric, emphasizing the inextricable link between power groups and the state.

Thus, political elites can be defined as groups of people who exercise control with formal and informal practices over the adoption and implementation of key political decisions by the system of state power institutions. Various socio-political groups who do not have any significant influence on the system of state power institutions are not part of the elite category. Yet, this does not diminish their ability to exert influence indirectly.

Positional approach in the study of elites

I used the *positional approach* to gather scientifically valuable information on the mechanisms, channels and trends in the establishment of power groups. This approach establishes a correlation between a person's degree of influence on political processes and their position within the power hierarchy. A classic example of such an approach is *The Power Elite* by Wright Mills: while examining political, economic and military power structures, the American researcher concluded that there is only one tightly connected elite [22]. However, political science has been developing its conceptual system and other approaches have been proposed: the *reputational approach* (Hunter) and the *decisional approach* (Dahl). Nonetheless, it is the positional approach that remains an informative method of analysis primarily focusing on the structural and functional changes of political elites. To deeper analyse the received data, a biographical component has been added. This allows researchers to track and reflect on the professional experience of a power group members, to pinpoint their career crossovers, and to define the borders of certain power fractions (which are merged for some specific reasons) etc.

This analysis is aimed at measuring the main parameters of the structural changes in power groups, giving the chance to quantitatively characterize the dynamic positions of certain members of the political elite, using a wider empiric material¹. The positional approach was used to study the transformation of elitogenesis in countries of Eastern Europe during the start of the post-Soviet transformations [34] as well as decades after [8].

To perform the quantitative analysis of political elites, I have used the data from open sources pertaining to the career paths of 886 political figures in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, out of them: 252 from Lithuania, 271 from Estonia and 363 from Latvia. The latter case represented the biggest number of parliamentary electoral cycles — nine compared to seven in Lithuania and eight in

¹ "The characteristics of the recruitment pool and political careers may be an important indication of the structure of social and political power, which lies in the foundation of elite recruiting, especially the specifics of socio-political system within which the elite is formed and functions." [6, p. 25].

Estonia). Approximately 53% of those analysed were members of parliament, 40% — government officials, 7% — presidents, their advisors and aides. I used special filters (for instance, “no less than one year as minister”, or “no less than two terms as an MP”). It allowed me to exclude non-relevant political figures from the groups analysed.

Elite recruitment in a new environment

The increasing complexity of social structures in the Baltic states resulted in a change in the composition of their political elites. This was a blow to the former Soviet bureaucrats and administrators, the so-called *nomenklatura*. The rivalry intensified between the former Soviet administration system staff. In the new environment, they were competing not just with their former colleagues, but also with new challengers from the intelligentsia, business and foreign emigrant communities. This combination of representatives of these four groups defined the structural dynamics of political elites. From election to election, the composition of elites changed, power coalitions formed and dissolved, parties and movements appeared and disappeared, political crises sparked up, new leaders would replace the old ones.

Evidence of these deep shifts in the system of elite recruitment can be seen in the change of the age of the power group members. In 1981, the average age of the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR was 67. In 1986, it gradually dropped to 61 and to 56 in 1991. In the 1990s, the age composition of the Baltic countries' power groups was substantially different. The average age of Estonia's political elite was 43 years old, and in those of Latvia and Lithuania — 46 years old. The share of 22–44-year-olds holding administrative positions in the bureaucratic system were: 52% in Estonia, 50% in Lithuania, and 37% in Latvia. The average age of MPs during the first general elections was 50.8 years in Lithuania, 45.3 in Latvia and 43.3 in Estonia [18].

During ten years after gaining independence, several groups developed within the Baltics elite: the so-called ‘the moral politicians’, former *nomenklatura*, and repatriates coming from overseas emigrant communities and business. This configuration, combining elements of the old and the new age power groups, reflected the contradictory nature of the early post-Soviet period, characterized by the devolution of the former elite recruitment channels and mechanisms and their slow reformatting in the new political environment. This transformation of the power groups in the Baltic countries was gradually gaining momentum and was facilitated by a variety of factors [29].

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia showed similar structural patterns in the dynamics of their political elites. A strong inflow of creative intelligentsia during the first years after gaining independence (in the Baltics, the number of ‘moral politicians’ was 55% in the first half of the 1990s²) was soon replaced by the resurgence of former *nomenklatura*.

² Here and after, the author's estimates unless stated otherwise.

Matonyte claims that the Baltic countries did not just inherit the “distortions” of the Soviet social system. They inherited communists *in persona* [20]. In many cases, the “first secretaries of communist committees” were replaced by “instructors” — young and ambitious individuals who started their career within the Soviet power hierarchy in the late Soviet period. In the new political environment, they found an opportunity to improve their standing by emphasizing the values of an independent national state.³ Wide recruitment to political elites in the Soviet period showed that even after massive political shake-ups, power groups cannot be built from scratch. Up to the early 2000s, up to 40% of political elites in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were members of the old political regime.⁴

Businessmen and repatriates from the overseas Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian communities (mainly from the USA, Canada, Germany and Sweden) were a new source of elite recruitment. Since the early 2000s, representatives of the commercial sector have held no less than 30% (in some cases over 40%) of power positions in the Baltic countries. These overseas community repatriates were few in number: 2.8% in Latvia, 4% in Lithuania, and 1.7% in Estonia. However, even few in number, they managed to gain the highest political positions and became the main support link of elite recruitment by being ‘beacons’ of a complete break up with the Soviet system and of a strategic course for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Although having similar trends in the transformation of political elites, each Baltic country showed unique traits. For instance, Estonia’s specificity is the substantial “cleansing” of the former *nomenkulatura* from the ranks of the power groups: currently, only around 5% of the former *nomenkulatura* remains in their previous positions (half of the percentage in Lithuania and Latvia). Lithuania has a notably higher number of repatriates from the USA (mainly during Adamkus’s presidency in 1998—2003 and 2004—2009). They worked in the presidential administration, foreign relations, defense and security. Latvia’s unique feature is the biggest share of business in power groups: in the early 2010s, entrepreneurs held up to 60% of all posts in the government and up to 30% of seats in the parliament.

Nomenkulatura leaves, business stays

The four-part structure of the elites was a product of the challenging first years of independence. At the time of this study, only business representatives retained

³ According to Antanaitis, former *nomenkulatura* members comprised up to 50% of Lithuania’s ruling elite during the first years of independence [2, p. 92].

⁴ This also had a foreign policy effect. In 2004—2014, the position of the European commissioners from the Baltics was most frequently held (and retained for two terms) by representatives of power groups who began their professional career in the Communist Party: for example, in Lithuania — Grybauskaitė, in Latvia — Piebalgs, and in Estonia — Ansip and Kallas. Bielinis characterized Grybauskaitė as “a eurobureaucrat from the Soviet *nomenkulatura* school” [3]. Ansip was called “a smart boy with a bad attitude”. During the Soviet times he diligently ran errands for the party, and in the new era, he became a shrewd political heavyweight who called for people to ignore the demands of president Ilves [25].

their positions and other factions were slowly ‘dissolving’. People from the commercial circles, having a strong focus on the weakening of other elite fractions, helped establish the informal practices of inter-elite interaction — secret political protocols and backdoor shady deals. The democratic institutes of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are considerably dependent on the non-transparent actions of the power groups and the influence of business elites.

Each of the Baltic countries have their specifics: Estonia has *seemukapitalism* (nepotism capitalism) [17], Lithuania has the *statesmen clan* [12], Latvia has presidential “elections” by the oligarchs in the Riga Zoo [24]. Following formal political rules in the system of legal unpredictability of personal agreements remains a significant challenge for the Baltic countries’ elites. It plays into the weakening of public trust towards power groups and increasing crisis trends in the legitimacy of political institutes as a whole.

Active recruitment of business into the Baltic countries’ elites also had another noteworthy effect — prolonged political longevity of the former nomenkulatura representatives. Striving to remain in power in the new environment, they frequently formed blocs with “the captains of industry” and, commonly enough, former officials became millionaires after the privatization campaign or after acting as middlemen during exchanges. Consider, for instance, Lubys, a powerful Lithuanian political player (former prime minister and an influential businessman) or Šķēle, who was prime minister of Latvia twice. He smartly used privatization to become a successful business owner. According to Mezhevich, in Estonia the “politics-business relationship” was shifting to the “Northern, or Scandinavian, model”. The researcher notes that “extremes like selling rubles to Chechnya or shipping weapons on the *Estonia* ferry have elicited rather harsh criticism from the USA and Europe. It was after those events that there was a revision of the signs of the political elite and business merging; a PR-project was launched to promote the ruling elite to the category of traditional national values” [23, p. 176].

At the time of this study, the former nomenkulatura, who held leading posts including those of prime ministers and presidents, party leaders (mainly social democrats and centrists) are losing their political weight. In the Baltic countries, where the communist ideology and the Soviet way of life were declared illegal, members of this elite segment have been preoccupied with their own political survival. Their main skill is political trend-chasing; they are ready for any compromise, unexpected coalitions and various political deals. Trying to avoid mistakes, they carefully approach key issues of foreign policy and security, concentrating more on neutral subjects, for instance, trade, economic and social policies. This allowed them to take pragmatic stands that are easy on the voters. At the same time, these politicians have gradually turned into followers and not leaders, muffling their influence and losing their immunity from the pressure of their po-

litical opponents⁵. In addition, such a survival strategy contrasted with those of ‘moral politicians’ and overseas repatriates, who had ambitions of becoming the architects of the Baltic states’ new political regimes.

The main positions to slide into for the political elites of post-Soviet Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were social-democratic and centrist. In the new political environment, members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union managed to retain their positions not just as MPs and ministers, but also were elected presidents: in Latvia — presidents Ulmanis. However, the range of their political abilities was significantly limited. In essence, they had to act within some borders, the “red lines” established by the “moral politicians” and overseas repatriates.

The creative intelligentsia and repatriates, who mainly stood on nationalistic positions,⁶ aimed at strengthening the Euro-Atlantic integration as the unquestionable priority of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in terms of foreign policy and security. It was during the period of the “moral politicians” massive presence that the new tent pole political order was established; it was based on the principle of continuity — the succession of post-Soviet and pre-Soviet statehoods. The crux of this new idea was the concept of the Baltic countries’ “interrupted” statehood after they joined the Soviet Union in 1940. Representatives of overseas communities (mainly from the USA, where they had diplomatic missions “in exile”) insisted that the succession from the pre-war times be legally established.⁷ To achieve this, the elites of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia had to fully or partially restore the pre-Soviet laws, including constitutional ones, specific political parties and other important institutions with restitution of property. The Soviet period was officially designated “occupation”, a historic and cultural “trauma” which bore negative consequences in politics, economy and social and humanitarian fields [1; 19].

Creating Structural Limitations

From that moment, the elite recruitment system was defined by “red lines”, i.e. structural limitations that played a key role in the new political order of the Baltic States. Thirty years after the declarations of independence by Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, a new generation of political elites took the political front stage.

⁵ After 2014, a new point of contention is their stance on Crimea: thus, Savisaar, who supported Russia’s annexation of the Crimea, transformed from the once leader of Estonia’s *Popular Front* into “an agent of the Kremlin (see more [15]).

⁶ As noted by Tjevdoj-Burmuli, the establishment of an ethnocratic regime was aided by the characteristics of the new Baltic elites: “Locking the Russian-speaking part of the elite out of power was augmented by the arrival of a small but influential repatriate part of the Latvian and Estonian elite; they had no previous experience communicating with the Russian-speaking population and they transplanted their negative feelings towards the USSR as a whole onto them” [32, p. 136].

⁷ In 1940–1991, Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian missions were quite active in the USA: the Latvian and Lithuanian missions were based in Washington D.C. and the Estonian — in New York. Similar missions still remain in London and the Vatican. During the Soviet period, representatives of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian missions were listed as diplomats by the US State Department [21, p.177, 178].

More and more members of the elites never used to be members of the Communist parties and never worked in the Soviet administrations. They were born after the demise of the Soviet Union. However, despite the elapsed time, the same methods of inter-political consolidation are employed: earlier political elites built on distancing from the Soviet Union, now they speculate about “the Russian threat.” Having no Soviet experience, they are political successors of those who based their establishment as an elite on resisting the Soviet project.⁸ With the leaders of the right populist and the Eurosceptic movement (as much as it is possible in the Baltics) gaining more popularity lately, even their brash rhetoric never challenges the ideological foundations of the new *status quo* political order.

Continuity of pre-Soviet statehood. Euro-Atlantic integration, NATO-centric system of security and the “Russian threat” were never challenged by the former nomenklatura or the pragmatic representatives of the business community. Assisted by “moral politicians” and the repatriates,⁹ a new institutional framework was built — the pillars of a new political order, where it will be decided what should be allowed for the next generations of elites by forming the structural core of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia’s political space.

The question of history became a significant factor. The power group’s history policy aimed at showing the Baltic countries as victims of “two totalitarianisms” — Nazi and Soviet “occupation” is frequently used as an instrument of foreign policy, especially in relations with Russia.¹⁰ The power group’s active ex-

⁸ Kaja Kallas, daughter of the former Soviet figure, Estonian prime minister and then the European Commission vice-president Siim Kallas, became the leader of the Estonian *Reform Party* in 2018, which was created by her father. Gabrieliūš Landsbergis, a grandson of the *Sąjūdis* leader Landsbergis, got his MEP mandate from his grandfather and then led the party, which his grandfather created — *Homeland Union* — *Lithuanian Christian Democrats*. These are the only examples, but they are enough to see that the modern Baltic countries’ elites follow the classic Mosca formula: the ruling elites try to maintain their power by passing it on as inheritance.

⁹ The most famous presidential examples include: Latvia — Viķe-Freiberga, Lithuan — Adamkus, Estonia — Ilves. However, there are many more examples among presidential candidates: Latvia — Meierovics (a son of the pre-Soviet MFA) and Paegle (the curator of the Occupation Museum), in Lithuania — Lozoraitis (son of the Lithuanian MFA) and Bobelis (a man from Florida who did not want to give up his US citizenship), in Estonia — Taagepera (famous political scientist). Among ministers: in Latvia — Ritenis, Pavlovskis, Muižnieks; in Lithuania — Dudėnas, presidential advisors K. Ondratas, Mieželis, Šmulskštys, Kazickas; in Estonia — Rebas, Manitski, etc. The critical mass of repatriates, or “exiles” as they called themselves, was rather low (2.8% in Latvia, 4% in Lithuania, 1.7% in Estonia). However small in number, they gained the highest political posts and were the support link of elite recruitment, personifying the breakup with the Soviet period and a strategic course on accelerated Euro-Atlantic integration.

¹⁰ The accession of east European countries to the EU (mainly the Baltics and Poland) changed the approach to the common European history policy, aiding (via the promotion of securitization ideas) the drift from a narrative of common guilt to a narrative of a common threat, equating Nazism and communism, forming the argumentative base to issue demands for contributions to Russia. The Baltics play a significant role in this change. See more in *Historic Memory as Another Field for Political Tasks*. Editorial Discussion // *Russia in Global Politics*. 2020. Vol. 18, № 18. p. 59—80 («Историческая память — еще одно пространство, где решаются политические задачи». Дискуссия в редакции // *Россия в глобальной политике*. 2020. Т. 18, № 18. С. 59—80.)

ploitation of the “legacy of the past” has considerable effects on domestic policy, allowing the elites to not only strengthen their positions, but also find an easy excuse for literally any negative aspect of Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia’s daily life.¹¹

All the “red lines,” augmented with securitization, are carefully protected by the state, even with force if necessary. The personal dimension of political struggle has been losing relevance in the Baltics since they gained independence. The personality of politicians themselves (even having higher posts) is becoming less important: their actions, as well as the actions of power groups in general, are determined by the brutally narrow constraints of these conditions.

The Russia factor: external and internal Effects

After joining the Euro-Atlantic institutes, political elites of the Baltic countries lost their initial ideological drive that consolidated them domestically. It was ‘mission accomplished’ for the Return to Europe plan¹² and the local communities fully felt all of the pros and cons of being part of the EU and NATO. The ersatz “big idea” was the conflict approach to Russia. The elites of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia did not turn their states into a “bridge” between the East and West. Instead, they became countries of “one issue” — they are “experts” in “containing” Russia. They viewed the EU *Eastern Partnership* policy as part this of “containment.” The Baltic countries’ power elites earnest attempts to be beacons of democratization in the post-Soviet space and at the same time gatekeepers on the Western border have allowed the Latvian, Lithuania and Estonian elites to pretend to be exporters of Western values in the West’s foreign policy subordination system.

Lithuania’s power groups are the most active in this field.¹³ During the domination of the “moral politicians” within the Lithuanian political elite, they adopted the constitutional act “On the Non-Alignment of the Republic of Lithuania with Post-Soviet Eastern Alliances” (part of the 1992 Constitution). According to this document, the republic will “develop mutually advantageous relations with

¹¹ “History and memory are becoming not just an instrument of political struggle; they form the agenda and beacons of political development.” [26, p. 73].

¹² This issue was fairly quickly resolved with inter-elite, and later a wide societal, consensus. They managed to overcome the ideological strife of the first years of independence without major complications. From the recollection of one of the authors of the *Latvian Popular Front*’s political program and Latvian defense minister T. Jundzis (1991–1993, 1997–1998) “... there were two contrasting movements the western with EU and NATO as priorities; the eastern with good relations with Russia as priorities. Even though these movements are not mutually exclusive in theory, in reality, they are absolutely incompatible.” [14, p. 27].

¹³ Emphasizing the role of repatriates from the Lithuanian community in USA, who have significantly influenced the establishment of such an approach to Lithuania’s foreign policy aspirations. An important part was played by president V. Adamkus. The idea of “promoting democracy to the East” was common in his life in America, he viewed this as some kind of “civilizational mission” backed by the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which became the crux of the country’s foreign policy [13, p. 284; 16, p. 111].

each state that was formerly a part of the USSR, but never join, in any form, any new political, military, economic, or other unions or commonwealths of states formed on the basis of the former USSR.”¹⁴

In turn, thanks to the “Russian issue” there is still the so-called Baltic unity, at least as an ideological construct shared by the three states’ elites. The paths of post-Soviet transformations have made competitors of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia many times and in many fields, be it in economic, financial or infrastructural issues — like the construction of the *Rail Baltic* railway, trade or the unsuccessful project of a joint nuclear power plant. However, the idea of containing Russia, brandished by the power groups of the Baltic countries, still keeps them all together, allowing us to view Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia as both parts of the Euro-Atlantic and post-Soviet spaces.

Fifteen years ago, the idea of turning the Baltic states into a “bridge” between Europe and Russia¹⁵ was still discussed. However, this idea has been sidelined [28]. It must be noted that the decline of Russian transit through the Baltic ports is a result, but not the cause of this approach.¹⁶ The concept of a “transit bridge” was *de facto* denied by the political elites of the Baltic countries’.¹⁷

The idea of a confrontation with Moscow as the former [Soviet] Union Centre, which decided the Baltics’ political life for many decades, has not disappeared despite the passage of time, new Western allies, the once active trade and transit ties with Russia or the shift towards the EU and NATO. Forcing a “Return to Europe”, the Baltic countries’ elites did not just aim to get the formal membership in Western integration institutes, but also finalize their breakup with Russia as the non-West, thus proving their status as “Europe”. This old confrontation persists, gradually transforming into a confrontational foreign policy towards Russia,

¹⁴ *Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania* (Adopted by citizens of the Republic of Lithuania in the Referendum of 25 October 1992). URL: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.21892> (accessed 9.09.2020).

¹⁵ President V. Adamkus in his inaugural speech in 2004 spoke of Lithuania’s mission to be a regional gravity center that would “unite the East and West” (*Inaugural address to the nation by H. E. MR. Valdas Adamkus, President of the Republic of Lithuania. 12.07.2004.* URL: <http://archyvas.lrp.lt/en/news.full/5116> (accessed 14.05.2018)). In turn, the Latvian MFA Birkavs voice the concept of the Baltic states as the “Amber Gates” of business activities with Russia and USA working in the region. (*Birkavs V. Concluding remarks at the conference «Security and Prosperity in the Baltic Region». Riga. 1997. 17 November / Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia.* URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/speeches-and-interviews/4158-concluding-remarks-by-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-dr-valdis-birkavs-at-the-conference-security-and-prosperity-in-the-baltic-region-riga-latvia-november-17-1997> (accessed: 14.05.2018).

¹⁶ *Mezhevich N.M.* Cena sozhzhennyh mostov. URL: <https://www.kurier.lt/cena-sozhzhennyh-mostov> (accessed: 14.01.2020)

¹⁷ *Rinkevics E.:* Baltic states no longer a bridge between east and west, says Latvia // *The Guardian.* 18.03.2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/18/baltic-states-no-longer-a-bridge-between-east-and-west-says-latvia> (accessed 14.05.2019); New president Egils Levits: “Latvia is not a bridge from Russia to the West, it is the West.” // *BBC News, Riga.* 30.05.2019. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-48451005> (accessed: 14.01.2020).

which has already become an intrinsic part of the Baltic countries' domestic policies.¹⁸ For the Latvian, Lithuania and Estonian elites, who successfully completed the Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia turned from an irritant that reminded them of past "trauma" into a "source of danger" that they use to strengthen their own agency on domestic and foreign stages [30].

Renouncing their neutrality in the early 1990s, resistance to any meaningful economic initiatives from Russia in the region (*Nord Stream*) and attempts to sabotage its standing in post-Soviet space (*Eastern Partnership*), claims to a special opinion in the Russia-EU dialogue, buildup of NATO forces and resources on their territory — all of this is their mainline behaviour pattern. There is pressure on the "disloyal" political rivals (the *Labour Party* in Lithuania, *Harmony party* in Latvia and the *Estonian Centre Party*), along with administrative and propagandist pressure towards the local non-titular groups. The legally established wish of the elites to erase 50 years of Soviet experience has preserved the main divides in the Baltic countries: language, ethnic and the problem of mass "non-citizenship."¹⁹ According to R.H. Simonyan's estimates, the Baltic countries use the crisis in Ukraine to "discredit the ethnic minorities, mainly the Russians, in order to settle political scores with opponents, who they can now public accuse of having ties with Russia to much greater impact and having it serve as an excuse to strengthen secret services." [27, c. 63].

Conclusion

The transformation of power groups in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia has almost completed. The structural constraints described above, initiated by the power groups of the early post-reform years, had an impact on subsequent generations of elites. Despite the procedures for the democratic turnover of power groups, supporters and heirs of the political forces that came to power at the dawn of independence continue to maintain leading and dominant positions. Using the concept of a "Russian threat", there were systemic efforts to create a mechanism of the elites' reproduction, thus ensuring loyalty to the main ideological tenets and strengthening political control. At the same time, these attitudes narrow the arsenal of means of political reaction available to the elites in connection with external and internal changes. Interpreting various "incoming signals" mainly through the prism of threat reduces the elite's potential to find an adequate response to the existing challenges.

¹⁸ As noted by V. Vorotnikov, "It's hard to find states among the former Soviet Republics that would be so deliberate and unrelenting, sometimes hurting their own economic wellbeing in the process, over the span of many years aiming to consciously cut ties with their past and so persistently reorientating themselves to the West. Those are the three Baltics' states." [33, c. 134].

¹⁹ Tarasov, while examining the Latvian example, suggested that the ethnic policy was aimed at forming a new identity for Russians in Latvia — "Eurorussians" or "Latvians" [based on the Nation of Latvia, rather than the Latvian ethnicity — translator's note] in the long term, and this had nothing to do with the formation of a united civic nation [31].

Crisis trends in the legitimacy of the power groups, right and populist projects, the Eurosceptic ideas, artificial fearmongering of the security situation in the Baltic countries — these are signs of the gradual weakening of this system's ability to form and reproduce political elites. This complicates any possibility of switching from the antagonistic position in the Russia-Baltics political dialogue to relations based on mutual interest and respect.

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